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ABSTRACT

Teachers need to improve certain teaching and writing competencies if they are to improve student writing competencies. Teachers from the Atlanta school district were surveyed to determine their opinions for improving writing instruction. Survey results indicate that teacher education programs can be improved by: (1) making information on writing processes and teaching methods more accessible to teachers; (2) teaching of writing instruction to all teachers; (3) revising language arts textbooks to stress composition rather than mechanics; (4) involving parents and community in school writing programs; and (5) intensifying research on the processes of writing. (CJ)

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ABSTRACT

The writing needs of big city school teachers fall into three broad areas including student writing, strategies for improving students' writing and applying the writing processes to students' writing and their own. Teachers reported these needs in a survey conducted by the Atlanta Public Schools in conjunction with the Georgia State University/Southeast Center for the Teaching of Writing.

Writing Needs of Big City School Teachers

Allan Spanjer

Regina Johnson

What are the staff development needs of teachers of composition?

Teachers in the Atlanta Public Schools see their needs falling into three broad categories:

- . Evaluating student writing performance
- . Strategies for improving students' writing proficiency
- . Applying the writing processes to students' writing and to their own

Teachers reported these needs in a survey conducted by the Atlanta Public Schools in conjunction with the Georgia State University/Southeast Center for the Teacher of Writing (GSU/SCTW), an affiliate of the University of California at Berkeley/Bay Area Writing Project (UCB/BAWP). The survey was conducted in order to determine inservice staff development priorities in the teacher of writing.

The needs assessment instrument, developed by GSU/SCTW, reflects the Center's philosophy - teachers of writing must themselves write, they must be competent in linguistic and pedagogical practices and be sensitive to the writing performance needs of students. Based on these criteria the instrument is divided into five broad categories: evaluating writing, teaching strategies, composing written discourse, writing skills, and intellectual abilities and skills. Each category is explicitly defined by a list of competencies including such items as involving students in evaluation, providing opportunities to write in a variety of modes, applying the processes of rewriting, developing complex sentence structures,

and developing imaginative responses, respectively.

For each item listed on the instrument teachers were asked first, to respond "yes," or "no," whether or not they needed to improve their competence, and secondly, to rate their current level of competence on a five point scale. For example:

I. Evaluating Writing.

- A. Diagnosing student writing problems to determine areas of student needs, i.e., content, organization, mechanical conventions, etc.

1. I need to improve my competence in this area. YES NO

2. My current competence level is this area

is	Low				High
	A	B	C	D	E

The survey was administered to 460 teachers, representing a 20 per cent random sample. The sample was selected from among all middle and elementary teachers and from secondary English teachers. Sixty-seven per cent of those surveyed responded. Slightly more than one third of the respondents taught high school composition with the remainder evenly distributed across grade levels - kindergarten through grade eight. Over half of the respondents was experienced teachers who held fifth year certification or above and had thirteen or more years teaching experience. Eighty per cent of the respondents were black and almost 90 per cent were female.

There are over 3,800 on the Atlanta Public Schools, a majority

of whom are of a minority race. The student population numbers about 80,000, consisting of approximately 90 per cent minority races.

The system comprises 135 schools including 22 high schools, 8 middle schools and 105 elementary schools.

Results of the survey indicated one half or more of the respondents perceived a need (as distinguished from an observed need) to improve their competence in 80 per cent of the items listed and their current level of competence in these items was average. The items in which teachers expressed the highest need were:

- . Using formalized approaches to evaluate students' written composition, e.g., holistic, primary trait, T-unit.
- . Providing experiences in writing for various forms of media, e.g., television, radio, filmscript writing.
- . Applying language theory to written discourse, e.g., language acquisition, dialectology, grammatical theory.
- . Organizing a system for managing the writing program, e.g., providing for individualized and group instruction, maintaining records.
- . Applying the processes of prewriting, e.g., identifying topic, audience, mode of writing.
- . Evaluating the effectiveness of the school's writing program for students, e.g., goals, content, scope and sequence.
- . Measuring changes in logical thinking, imaginative responses and creativity as dimensions of growth in student writing.
- . Applying the processes of writing, e.g., thinking, drafting, aiming at fluency.

- . Providing opportunities to write in other subject matter content areas, e.g., social science, mathematics, natural science.
- . Diagnosing student writing problems to determine areas of student needs, i.e., content, organization, mechanical conventions.

Although not among the top ten needs the next four needs in priority included writing in different modes of discourse, writing in all the language arts areas, facilitating writing by students with varying abilities and interests, and providing exercises for improving students' intellectual skills.

Those items in which the majority of the teachers indicated they were competent and reported less needs for staff development, were concerned primarily with the mechanics and conventions of writing.

What do these results tell us about the perceived needs of writing teachers?

As expected, teachers see themselves as both knowledgeable and competent to teach the mechanics and conventions of writing. Their competence has been validated over the years by students' stable scores on measures assessing these skills; these skills generally did not show a decline for 13 and 17 year olds on the writing sample of the second round of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1975). While teachers need to continue to instruct students in the mechanics and conventions, it is imperative that they expand their knowledge and teaching of writing to include other areas of composition listed in the GSU/SCTW survey.

Many of the other assessed areas, in which the majority of the teachers expressed a need to gain competence, are related to those areas of writing

in which NAEP reports students tend to be deficient - writing coherent, logically developed and syntactically fluent compositions (Mellon, 1976). Thus, there appears to be a definitive relationship between teacher's perceived level of competency in teacher writing skills and students' ability to perform those skills.

Results of standardized tests assessing the writing ability of student enrolled in the Atlanta Public School System also tend to corroborate this relationship between teacher competence and student performance. In 1979 Atlanta senior high school students had a mean score of 317, more than 100 points below the national average, on the Scholastic Aptitude Test verbal portion. On the Test of Academic Progress, administered to 11th graders in 1978, Atlanta students had a mean standard score of 40.5, 9.5 points below the national norm, or a grade equivalent of 8.1 on the composition portion of the test. These scores showed a modest increase over those of 1975, which were 38.9, a grade equivalent of 7.6. The Atlanta teachers' expressed need to improve their competence in the composing processes - prewriting, writing and rewriting - and in strategies for teaching and evaluating students' writing, therefore, seems essential to helping students improve their writing proficiency.

What are the implications of this study for teacher education? If the perceived needs of writing teachers are to be accommodated and if the writing proficiency of students is to be impacted several things will have to happen which have bearing on preservice and inservice teacher education.

First, new knowledge on the writing processes and on methods of teaching writing will have to be made accessible to preservice and inservice

service faculty at both the school and college levels. During the past decade research studies and experiential findings have contributed new information which constitutes a basis for reformulating the philosophy and methodologies influencing the teaching of writing. This new knowledge, as revealed by a few citations listed below, stresses a process approach to teaching writing rather than a structured, mechanistic approach.

- . Teachers need to use a variety of methods which children can adopt according to their own patterns of learning and of writing (Moffett, 1976; Emig, 1971).
- . Processes involved in writing are the basics which students must master if their writing performance is to improve (Hunt, 1970).
- . Students can provide each other with meaningful editing assistance (Moffett & Wagner, 1976).
- . Writing needs to be an integral part of all content courses since students can learn content through writing (Britton, 1976).
- . Students can write all modes of discourse at all levels (Moffett, 1968).
- . Writing should be taught as an integral part of all of the language arts (Moffett & Wagner, 1976).
- . The emphasis on process necessitates utilization of new criteria for assessing students' writing performance (Cooper, Odell, 1977).

Through cooperative means, school teachers and college instructors need to adapt and apply this new knowledge and philosophy to their respective levels of education.

Second, all teachers regardless of their subject field need to accept responsibility for teaching writing. Writing as a tool for learning is too important to be solely the responsibility of English teachers. If students are to value writing and to discover its power for formulating thought, it needs to be taught and practiced across the curriculum. Teachers in all disciplines need to coordinate their efforts and emphasize and utilize writing as a means for learning content, just as the other communication tools of reading, listening and speaking are used as means for learning content. The National Council of Teachers of English in its recently adopted standards for basic skills writing programs takes the position that writing " ...warrants the full, generous and continuing effort of all teachers " (NCTE, 1979).

Some content area teachers already use a limited number of writing techniques, such as essay testing and note taking, in their courses. However, many more methods are emerging which not only allow students to demonstrate through writing what content they know, but also to write as a means to learning content. An example of the latter might be having students in a science class assume they are a plant cell and write a letter to an animal cell telling how they are different.

Traditionally, teachers in the various disciplines have not adopted writing methods as tools for their trade partly because of a lack of confidence in their own writing and a lack of competence in teaching the conventions of writing. Teachers have varying linguistic abilities and levels of writing competence. It isn't necessary for all of them to perform like great authors, nor is it necessary for them to teach the

conventions of grammar. As John Mellon suggests, control of mechanical conventions is desirable, but a minor part of writing; matters of thought and expression are more fundamental (Mellon, 1975). Using writing as a means to promoting thought and expression seems especially appropriate as a focus for the non language arts specialist.

Third, teachers need to understand and practice the processes of writing in order to effectively apply this knowledge to the development of student writing proficiency. Consequently, teachers should themselves write.

Author/educator Donald Murray explains that accepting oneself as a writer is a real problem (Murray, 1980). Many writers are insecure about their writing. By failing to cope with these insecurities teachers have developed blocks to writing which have curtailed their writing practices and their use of writing as a tool for learning.

Teachers, who themselves write, seem to have a clearer understanding of the processes of writing. Their writing has provided them an opportunity to reflect on how they prepare and motivate themselves to write, how they formulate what they think and mean and how they revise and improve a piece of writing. Teachers who write experience the joys, fears and frustrations that go with composing written discourse and tend to develop a sense of realism about writing and the teaching of writing. And teachers who write and share their writing enjoy a certain credibility with students in that they can better understand and identify with the feelings and processes experienced by students as they write.

Teachers who have started to write again, through the various affili-

ated programs of the University of California at Berkeley/Bay Area Writing Project, report a new security and power as teachers of writing. For many, the writing experience has been the single most important dimension of the project (UCB/BAWP, 1977).

This concept is not only pertinent to preservice education but also to inservice education. Teacher preparation programs need to require more writing from students so they are more competent and secure about their own writing.

Fourth, language arts textbooks, which heavily influence school curriculum and what the teacher teaches must be revised to stress the composing processes of prewriting, writing and rewriting rather than the mechanics of writing independent of the student's own writing. Throughout the history of American schooling the approach of teaching the mechanical conventions in isolation from the composing processes has dominated the teaching of writing. Textbook publishers have contributed to this situation. But research data on the transfer of language conventions taught in isolation to actual student writing are bleak, and in many cases regressive (Graves, 1977).

At present publishers tend to design textbooks to fit the competency level of the users. The users, as this study indicates, perceive they are prepared to teach the mechanics of writing but lack the strategies and processes for improving students' writing proficiency. The challenge to publishers and their authors is to produce textbooks that are aimed at elevating the competence level of writing teachers, that advocate practices where learning to write is writing, where form (mechanics) follows

function (thought and expression). Donald Murray's A Writer Teaches Writing is an example of this approach.

Fifth, parent and community groups must be informed about the schools' writing program and the ways they can support it. There is increasing public awareness of the writing problem. Parents need to know the school is cognizant of the problem and is doing something about it.

They need to be furnished information which describes the focus and content of the writing program, how the program is consistent or inconsistent with the adopted textbooks and the kinds of inservice staff development activities teachers are engaged in to improve their own teaching skills and writing competence. This same information should include ways the school wants to work collaboratively with parents as a means toward improving the home environment for learning to write. One way might include giving guidance to parents on how they can write with their children to increase fluency and to exercise thought.

Sixth, research efforts on the processes of writing, the teaching of writing and the evaluation of writing need to be intensified. Attention needs to be given to how students develop and organize ideas, how they judge and revise their writing, how they meet and surmount difficulties in composing and how they overcome writing anxiety (Bossone, 1980). These areas of research are especially relevant to teachers and teacher educators because of the implications for instruction. Therefore teachers need to involve themselves increasingly in conducting and reporting field studies which pertain to the ways student writers learn to compose and to the ways teachers help students master these processes. Teacher education programs

need to orient teachers toward action research and to prepare them with the skills for carrying out these studies in their own classrooms.

Seventh, improved delivery systems for diffusing knowledge and for changing teaching performance need to be applied. Although much new knowledge on the development of writing competence and on effective teaching practice is available, most teachers are not aware of it. Practitioners at all levels of education - elementary through college - need to have easy access to this knowledge if they are to be aware of what has been happening in the field of composition. However, accessibility to the knowledge does not ensure improved classroom practices. Research shows that for the large majority of teachers mastery of new teaching skills and strategies requires the development of inservice programs which include not only theory or presentation of a skill or strategy, but also demonstration or modeling, practice in simulated and classroom settings, feedback about performance, and assistance with the transfer of skills and strategies to the classroom. If any of these five components are left out the impact of training will be weakened in that fewer numbers of teachers will progress to the transfer level - the most powerful determinant for impacting student learning (Joyce & Showers, 1980). Effective inservice programs aimed at improving the teaching of writing will need to combine theory, modeling, practice, feedback and coaching for application.

In conclusion, teachers in the Atlanta system (and elsewhere, given the national decline in student writing ability) need to improve certain competencies if they are to substantially impact the writing performance

of their students. Achieving this outcome has important implications for teacher education. Preservice and inservice teacher preparation programs must effectively address the diffusion and application of knowledge on improved writing practices in order to increase the magnitude of classroom implementation.

Teachers at all grade levels and in all disciplines must intensify and coordinate their efforts. They must be writing, be coping with their insecurities about writing, be studying and improving their own writing, and be using writing methods which help them teach their respective disciplines. As John Mellon professes, writing is the greatest tool of thinking ever invented by man (Mellon, 1975). The profession cannot afford to minimize a process that cultivates the mind. The heralded return to teaching composition needs more than a little help along the way.

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